

Commonwealth Games spell major crisis for Indian elite

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The Commonwealth Games (CWG), scheduled to begin on October 3 in Delhi, pose a major crisis for the Indian ruling elite. Conceived as a venue to showcase India's capital as a "world class city", the games have instead provided a graphic illustration of the corruption and incompetence of the India's political establishment, placing the very success of the event in question.

Held every four years, the CWG is an international, multi-sport event, featuring competition involving athletes from Commonwealth of Nations members. The 2006 games were hosted by Australia in Melbourne.

Among the main issues plaguing the 2010 games are corruption scandals involving the construction of game venues, shoddy construction and uninhabitable conditions at the Games Village providing accommodation for athletes, as well as the security of athletes and officials. These issues have led to the withdrawal of number of world class athletes from the event, compromising the games' athletic standing.

The right to host the 2010 CWG was won by India in 2003 during the period of then prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government. The CWG will be the first such international sporting event to be held in India since the Asian Games in 1982. It will draw over 7,000 athletes, officials and other personnel from 71 teams in the 54 member countries of the Commonwealth.

The chance to host CWG in Delhi is considered by Indian elite as an opportunity to showcase India's arrival on the world stage as a first-class economic and political power. Thus, the crisis and controversy surrounding the games are creating serious embarrassment for the current Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, and for the

Indian ruling elite as a whole.

The issue generating the most negative press are the filthy and unhygienic conditions at the Games Village. The Commonwealth Games Federation (CGF) described the athlete's village as "uninhabitable" as of September 21. There was rubble in doorways, toilets were not functioning properly, and electrical fittings were problematic. Basements were filled with accumulated water from heavy rain, and sections of the village had yet to be completed.

Highlighting the sub-standard nature of construction at the games, on September 21 a footbridge at Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium, the main venue of the CWG, collapsed injuring 26 workers. The following day, a false ceiling in the weightlifting venue collapsed. Nearly 100 construction workers have reportedly died on games sites from accidents or contagious illness contracted in the filthy and crowded accommodations set up for workers. Hundreds more have been injured.

The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) has expressed serious concerns about the quality of the CWG stadiums. Sachin Sandhir, RICS head in India, warned, "The last-minute dash to complete most venues has resulted in huge compromise on quality of projects, bypassing of clearances, and exploitation of workers".

In a clear reference to the recent collapse of a footbridge and ceiling, he added that structures caving in or showing signs of damage so soon after being built "raise serious concerns on the structural quality, viability and safety of venues, and are indicative of the gross violations of building codes and regulations and the level of adherence to ethical professional practices".

The corruption issues involving CWG are so obvious that the country's federal body, the Central Bureau of Investigation and Vigilance Commission, said at the

end of July that they had discovered irregularities in various contracts for 16 games-related projects. The athletes' village swimming pool, training hall and athletic track were among them. Two high-ranking officials also have been accused of transferring money to a London-based firm for services during the Queen's Baton Relay in London last October without proper paperwork.

Adding to the fear of athletes coming from abroad, on September 19 two tourists were shot dead in front of Jama Masjid, a famous mosque in New Delhi.

This situation has led to the withdrawal of a number of high-profile athletes from the games, citing security risks as well as health concerns in relation to conditions at the Games Village. Among them are Jamaica sprinters and Olympic medallists Usain Bolt and Veronica Campbell-Brown; cyclists Chris Hoy and Victoria Pendleton from Britain; Australian swimmer Cate Campbell; heptathlete Jessica Ennis; and tennis players Andy Murray and Lleyton Hewitt. Also withdrawing are French Open finalist Samantha Stosur; Kenya's David Rudisha, world record holder at 800 metres; triple jump champion Phillips Idowu; and 400-metre runner Christine Ohuruogu.

In response to this situation, Indian authorities in charge of Games preparations have tried to downplay the issue. Declaring that media reports about filthy conditions in the Games Village were "exaggerated", Lalit Bhanot, spokesperson for the CWG Organising Committee, claimed that the village was "probably one of the best ever". This statement is absurd in the context of widespread media footage exposing the abysmal facilities at the Village.

"Everyone has different standards about cleanliness", Bhanot added. "The Westerners have different standards, we have different standards". In an effort at damage control, however, hundreds of extra workers have been deployed in a last-ditch effort to clean up the facilities.

While Indian authorities have scrambled to prepare for the games, the impoverished Delhi population is paying the price. In the name of "beautifying the city", authorities have evicted street hawkers, day labourers, migrants and other people viewed as undesirable for the city's image. An estimated 60,000 street beggars have been rounded up in the slums of New Delhi, utilizing an old repressive anti-begging law.

Over the past seven years, the Delhi government has been "cleaning up" the city by demolishing the homes of slum-dwellers. The overwhelming majority of these people have not been given alternative accommodations. Just days ago, a slum in existence for 25 years was demolished, displacing 470 families. More than half of the New Delhi population are slum-dwellers, and this population is estimated to have grown during construction for the CWG.

In a desperate attempt to avoid a huge embarrassment for his government, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh convened a top level meeting of senior officials late last month to discuss measures to remedy the situation. The rush by authorities to ready venues for the games and avert the looming international embarrassment poses the risk of further compromises on safety and quality.

Expressing concerns within the big business establishment over negative signals the scandalous situation surrounding the CWG could send to global investors, Amit Mitra, general secretary of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry, said, "It is a sad state of affairs indeed, and, psychologically, puts a question mark against India's capacity to deliver".

In April 2007, the Indian government approved US\$790 million for the Commonwealth Games. But the real CWG budget is now estimated to have shot up to between US\$3.17 billion and US\$6.34 billion. While the government seizes on the event to celebrate "India's rise", 80 percent of the country's population struggles to survive on \$2 a day.



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